

ORCHARD STREET LOVES ANDY CAPPON



Andy and the Kids in 1974

Andy Cappon

1/10/35 - 05/30/99

A Most Extraordinary Man

Thoughts About Andy

On the afternoon of May 30, 1999, Andy Cappon died in a small plane crash in New York with his physician and flying buddy, Dr. John Donato.

We have all lost a good friend! Andy was a most extraordinary man. He was a unique, one of kind individual. His abilities and talents spanned many areas. He was smart, analytical, resourceful, creative and mechanical. There wasn't anything that he couldn't do well. Some would have called him a visionary. If you measure the mark of man by his good deeds, Andy's "cup runneth over."

Andy was an activist, an agitator - an individual who had truly deep concerns for the most basic rights of people. Moreover, he cared for children in his neighborhood in a most passionate way. He dedicated his life to creating projects and activities that would assist people in improving the quality of their lives.

Although he was sometimes misunderstood and some people dismissed him as just a "character," he had an amazing ability for seeing views from places where most of us would never go. He was extremely adept at getting beyond the verbal maneuverings of government officials and understanding their hidden agendas. He had a sharp mind for analyzing most situations correctly. And more often than not, he was right.

He could definitely be difficult at times, but if you were willing to make the effort to know him better, you would soon realize that you were in the presence of a very special person.

Andy believed that everything was possible. He pushed us to go beyond our self-imposed limitations. He lived life to the fullest and he did it on his own terms and in his own inimitable style.

And life for Andy wasn't all work and serious issues. He liked having fun and enjoyed having people around him. On a regular basis, he would share his latest opinions with friends and foe around a giant pot of rice and beans. He liked his home and neighborhood the best. Many of his ideas originated around the kitchen table and on the front stoop.

We will all remember Andy as a courageous, generous, optimistic and selfless individual who touched the lives of those who knew him in a significant way.

In the January 16, 1989 edition of the Orchard Street Journal, the following quote from Dr. Martin King, Jr. was on the cover. Andy's life so exemplifies the words of Dr. King's message.

"Cowardice asks the question, Is it safe? Expediency asks the question, Is it politic? Vanity asks the question, Is it Popular? But conscience asks the question, Is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because his conscience tell him that it is right..."

Below you will find the story of Andy Cappon put together from articles, essays, and archival information. As you read, you will begin to understand why Andy Cappon was a most extraordinary man.

Holland

Andy was born in Strijen, a small farming town in the Netherlands in 1935. From age 5 to 10 (1940 to 1945), his town was under German occupation. Andy said that Orchard Street in 1968 (after the '67 riots) reminded him of Rotterdam after the German bombing. But in Holland after the war everyone was

rebuilding. On Orchard Street no one was rebuilding. So Andy began....

How It All Began

Excerpts from an article on Andy in Esso's Horizons newsletter in 1974. Andy worked for Esso Research and Engineering as a lab technician for 20 years:

Orchard Street lies just southeast of downtown Newark in the shadow of City Hall and the new federal building. Sandwiched between Broad Street and McCarter Highway, it is in the East Ward, but not part of Newark's famed Ironbound section, an ethnic enclave of neat houses and busy stores.

Instead, the neighborhood is characterized by abandoned buildings, burned out shells of houses and rubble-strewn lots - a bleak, pockmarked, urban landscape.

Andy Cappon lives on Orchard Street. His reasons for moving there are difficult for most of us to understand. To Andy, it was easy.

"I wanted to help the children enjoy life a little more," the tall, blue-eyed Dutchman said, "and I enjoy myself when I'm helping them. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't do it." Andy has simplified the story of a man who is spending the majority of his time helping a group of children and teenagers to whom life has been somewhat less than kind.

His involvement with the people of Orchard Street began with a coffeehouse near the Rutgers Newark campus. He opened it in 1968 to provide a place for a teenage band to perform. Andy met the young musicians while living in Linden, where he and his first wife Nancy had settled after moving here from Canada in 1966.

"garage" met an all too familiar fate for buildings in the Orchard Street area - a fire left the building unusable. Andy's reaction: "Let's move on."

Transportation

In order to provide transportation for many of the children's activities, Andy fixed up old school buses, passengers vans, a large truck, and even a pop-up tent trailer. Although they broke down often, usually on the long trips to Vermont, Andy repaired them over and over again. He was an expert mechanic, but never seemed to have the time to keep all of the vehicles running in top condition.

The Recycling Project

From the beginning of the Orchard Street Association, Andy always developed activities for local youth that would allow them to work and earn money. For many summers, teenagers were able to work for the Association through the Neighborhood Youth Corps and receive a minimum wage salary.

For a short period of time all of the kids became involved in selling bricks. This came about in a most unusual way. Using a small tractor, Andy would knock down the abandoned buildings in the area. The kids would collect the bricks, clean them, and sell them to Andy. He would then advertise in his company's newsletter that he had bricks for sale and sell them to people from the suburbs.

In 1983, Andy began a recycling project at the "garage." It started with collecting aluminum cans and he built the machinery for crushing and sorting the cans himself. The kids and adults from the area worked at the recycling center in a number of ways: weighing cans, collecting money, maintaining address cards and a sales ledger, operating the

machines, and keeping the space clean. In time, bottles and newspapers were also recycled depending on their market value. For awhile, Andy had an agreement with Alcoa to buy the cans. They also provided containers on site.

The recycling project became one of the largest buy-back centers for aluminum cans on the East Coast. It also provided support for the Children's Puppet Circus, had a positive impact on the environment, disposed of garbage in a safe, efficient and sensible way, and gave local people a chance to earn a living. After the "garage" burned down, Andy began recycling at other places outside of the neighborhood.

Excerpts from an article in August 1988 from the Vermont Chronicle entitled Bury, Burn, or Recycle? The Orchard Street solution...:

It's about ten o'clock on a very hot Thursday night in Newark. A half dozen people are sitting on the front steps of Andy Cappon's house at 95 Orchard Street drinking beer from cans.

"Throw 'em in the street," Mr. Cappon says when the cans are empty. "We'll buy them back in the morning." It's not a wisecrack. By morning every can has, indeed, vanished from Orchard Street and undoubtedly reappeared at Mr. Cappon's buy-back recycling center less than a block away. The big garage where Mr. Cappon buys and sorts cans and newspapers is humming Friday morning. A steady stream of people drop by - in cars, on foot, many pushing shopping carts packed full of cans.

It was sort of an accident that Mr. Cappon wound up with a busy and profitable buy-back center. He says he "backed into" the business. About 15 years ago, Mr. Cappon thought he

might like to build a solar collector out of aluminum cans. He paid the neighborhood kids to collect the cans for him. The problem that he didn't foresee was that the kids didn't want to stop. They welcomed the bit of cash that picking cans netted them. So he kept buying cans. Kids kept collecting them. And before long, all kinds of people were scouring the streets of Newark for aluminum.

Mr. Cappon became intimately involved in the politics as well as the economics of trash disposal. So much so, that this summer he was arrested for stealing garbage from a dumpsite outside of the county recycling office - the same office that is responsible for promoting recycling. The theft was aimed at making a point. The trash was analyzed and it turned out that 70 percent of the garbage that the recycling program office was throwing out was either recyclable or could have been composted.

For several years, Mr. Cappon has been trying to persuade the city of Newark to subsidize buy-back centers. He says, "a buy-back center creates money from nowhere and it puts the money in the pockets of the people who need it. Most of our suppliers are unemployable people who live on public assistance. On an average they bring in \$15 worth of cans or paper a day, or about \$100 worth a month. That \$100 gives them money for a little extra food, a piece of new clothing, and maybe a pack of cigarettes."

Excerpts from an article in the Star Ledger in August 1986 entitled Puppet Circus - Orchard Street troupe wows its audiences with life-sized fun:

It's not Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey, but the Orchard Street Puppet Circus is one of the greatest shows on earth, and for a variety of reasons. The Newark-based troupe, comprising youngsters who live on

to read a statement to the Symphony Hall audience while friends of the Orchard Street Association distributed fliers opposing the redevelopment plans. The complaint against him was made by Mayor Sharpe James.

An excerpt from the text of his speech reads as follows: *"The January 1989 Proposed Development Plan for the Symphony Hall Music Center clearly states that our existence, our lives, our homes, our small businesses and even our cultural activities are incompatible with your attendance. Therefore, we, who have lived here all or most of our lives must be driven out. ...We are canceling next Saturday's opera performance. We are closing Symphony Hall down until such time that every dollar spent for development for suburbanites is matched with a dollar for housing for Newark residents."*

From the Cornucopia Network of NJ on Andy's involvement in the sludge issue:

After the federal government prohibited the dumping of sludge in the oceans, municipalities and regional sewage groups were forced to come up with a plan for the processing of sludge in the most beneficial way.

On the local scene, the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission (PVSC), which serves as the treatment plant for four highly industrialized northern NJ counties including Essex, established a Citizens Advisory Committee to advise them on what to do with huge amounts of toxic sludge. Andy was an original member of this committee which was eventually disbanded when the people oriented representatives began to outnumber the corporate and governmental ones. They asked too many questions and wanted to provide too much input.

For a decade Andy devoted his time to this matter with folks from the Cornucopia Network of NJ, the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Waste, and the Grassroots Environmental Organization. His greatest contribution was a brilliant 2 page minority report which was included in the main Hazen & Sawyer Report on the beneficial uses of sludge in 1992. Had they followed Andy's advice, we wouldn't still be talking about what to do with toxic sludge.

As part of a recent settlement between the sludge companies and PVSC, Andy was granted a contribution of \$100,000 for the Citizens Environmental Committee to carry out projects that Andy has been thinking about for years, such as greenhouses, composting, and testing for toxics on Newark land.

Andy's Serious Illness:

In January 1996, Andy was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Because it had spread into the bones, the prognosis was bleak. Three weeks later he suffered a heart attack while dancing at the 9th Street Theater cabaret.

Always the optimist, Andy decided to take this situation into his own hands. With Mary doing the bulk of the research, Andy decided to combine some traditional medical treatment with a change in his diet. Studies had found that a substance in soy products could be beneficial for his condition. He became a vegan and ate a tofu based diet.

In a relatively short period of time, the prostate cancer was in remission and Andy was gaining his strength back. Given only a bleak prognosis, he had survived for more than three years and was in good health. Evidence of this was that during the past year, he repaired the roof of his house and put in the foundation and part of the floor for the greenhouse.

Andy & Mary:

Andy was a remarkable man and he surrounded himself with good people who could support him in his efforts. For more than 20 years, Andy and Mary were life partners. They complemented each other very well. Mary was wise, calm, and steady, able to follow through with her own pursuits, willing to encourage Andy on his, and astute enough to know when to step in and when to step aside.

From Mary Larsen:

In the last few years, Andy spent many hours at meetings, and had some role in bringing together people from all different wards whose communities, black and white, have been quite separated.

He also went door to door in our voting district, with voting list in hand, and discovered that less than 50% of the list was accurate. This was fundamental work needed to effect political change. He's been trying hard to get others to do the same in other districts. Andy was impatient with talk "Do it" he'd say.

This is a celebration

Of Andy Cappon

Born in 1935 in the Netherlands

Who lived on Orchard Street

Yes, Andy lived on Orchard St.

From 1968 to last weekend

Who died in a plane crash

On Sunday, May 30

He was a good man

